Chris (00:01):
Hello. Today, we're going to talk about how historical movies on racism and slavery demonstrate the public mindset on race relations in America. We're doing this because we've noticed a trend in Hollywood towards the production of movies that focus on the topic, with a few new ones coming out seemingly every year. It's our opinion that the popular movies of the time reflect societal values of the period in which it was produced. And as such, we would like to explore three, and if we have time, four movies that share a common theme.

Speaker 2 (00:24):
The main three movies we're going to be analyzing are Gone with the Wind from 1939, Glory from 1989, and 12 Years a Slave from 2013. As Chris said, our goal is to understand how these movies illustrate the perception of racial segregation and subjugation both in Hollywood and the general public at the time. The goal is to illustrate this through the three relatively distinct time periods these movies were produced in, and how the movies are more representative of the time in which they were produced rather than the time in which they are portraying, the three different time periods being the Jim Crow era, gone With The Wind from 1939; the post-Jim Crow, but kind of the Reagan administration War on Drugs, subtle racism era of the late 1980s; and what you may call the new era of race relations in America in 2013 with 12 Years a Slave, with the prominence of the Black Lives Movement and Black empowerment being very popular in modern society.

Chris (01:26):
So, as every good historian does, we're going to do this chronologically, starting with Gone with the Wind. Originally written by Margaret Mitchell and adapted into film by Victor Fleming. I'm going to start with a personal thing. This movie did not warrant four hours of run time, but that opinion did not seem to be shared with 1930s and '40s Americans. This movie won the hearts of the North and the South, and even saw reach abroad, earning $393 million, which adjusted for inflation, would be $3.44 billion today, according to the ever reputable Guinness World Records.

Speaker 2 (02:01):
I think Chris said that he doesn't think that it's worth the four-hour run time, but I think the run time and cinematography is really a reflection of the time period it's made in. The acting, the costumes, the cinematography as a whole was really revolutionary for its time, being in the 1930s, but also the themes that it plays on, particularly the idealization of the Lost Cause movement really plays into the time period that it was produced in rather than the time period in which it is portrayed.

Chris (02:32):
So, you might be asking, what is the Lost Cause movement? Well, let's ask Gaines Foster, who says, "The Lost Cause commonly refers to white Southerners' memory of the Civil War and the rituals that they created to perpetuate that memory." So, I feel like Gone with the Wind is kind of the quintessential movie that depicts the Lost Cause movement. It romanticizes the Antebellum South to the umpteenith degree. It's longing for tradition and equating joining the Confederacy with bravery throughout the movie.

(02:59):
What happens throughout the movie is this depiction of Scarlett O'Hara, who is doing everything she can to hold on to her house or her estate Terra. This is supposed to be a metaphor for old Southerners
looking back on the times that they lost through the Civil War and through emancipation in a positive light, and yearning to return to these time periods.

(03:19):
So you might be wondering, why did this appeal to the North? Well, we argue two things: that the North, like the South, felt threatened in their social station following Emancipation and enjoyed reliving a time in which they could never fall to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Think Nell Irvin Painter in The History of White People. Also, Gone with the Wind provided a separate viewpoint of the war that Northerners were likely unaccustomed to and therefore were incredibly interested in.

(03:41):
As well, Gone with the Wind had a lot of racial stereotyping in it and almost a whitewashing of the horrors of slavery, and this was kind of a sentiment that became socially acceptable at the time during this Jim Crow era, so much so that Hattie McDaniel, one of the lead actresses who won a award, was actually separated from the white actors during the award ceremony. It really illustrates the social time period that we lived in.

Speaker 2 (04:10):
When we think about Glory, directed by Edward Zwick, compared to Gone with the Wind, Gone with the Wind almost had a sentiment of being okay with racism and having direct racist caricatures within its film. With Glory, however, it gave out the sentiment of being somewhat not racist. It's important to define not racist as being different from being anti-racist.

Chris (04:33):
Even though this movie wasn't necessarily anti-racist, it's worth remembering that this movie was a landmark movie for history of Black empowerment. It put a lot of the strongest characters as Black men who, flipping the script of American history and American Civil War history, were fighting to secure their own freedoms rather than standing on the sidelines watching white soldiers fight for them.

Speaker 2 (04:57):
Even though Glory features a lot of prominent Black actors, including Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman, the whole story is told through a white lens of Colonel Shaw, which has a sense of being whitewashed in that it's being told through this narrow perspective. Thus, the characterization of all the Black characters is done through the lens of this white protagonist in Shaw.

Chris (05:22):
One strong similarity that we're beginning to pick up on between Glory and Gone with the Wind is that white protagonists almost entirely dictate the way in which we view the Black protagonists of the movie. Scarlett and her views on Mammy are how the audience has to view Mammy throughout the entirety of the book, and that's the same with Shaw. Perhaps even more telling is that both of these movies are produced by white directors. So it goes along with a common theme of white people dictating and narrating the history of Black America.

(05:55):
As evidence of this, the entire movie's plot line is almost entirely based on Shaw's correspondence. There's been a noticeable revisionist history for it, in which Shaw's initial reaction to being assigned to the 54th Regiment or being offered to work with the 54th Regiment was entirely negative. He refused
the position twice and showed negative depictions of them in his correspondence, which was entirely left out by the white director and the white writers in order to keep the narrative of cohesiveness going.

Speaker 2 (06:28):
This film very much touches on the idea of coming off as colorblind, society almost not wanting to come off as racist. This is also reflective of the '80s policies that were sadly racist, but in the eye of the law, indiscriminate. This film really promoted Black empowerment but glossing over almost the reluctance of white accountability.

Chris (06:47):
So, we're now moving into the relatively modern period, looking at 12 Years a Slave, directed by Steve McQueen, which in our framework has entered into the entirely anti-racism territory.

Speaker 2 (06:59):
A main reason why 12 Years a Slave succeeded so much at the box office was because of in-the-face style it had of portraying slavery. There was just frankly brutal imagery of slavery, where there was extended scenes giving very vivid and graphic depictions of the atrocities that were being committed against Black people. The film was very much trying to make the audience feel uncomfortable while watching it. It really appealed to the idea of anti-racism that was present at this time in society, where the Black Lives Matter and a lot of other movements were very prominent, in which they forced white people to confront history that, as time progressed, became easier to forget about.

Chris (07:41):
What we hope to show through this 10-minute podcast was that popular history and prevalent depictions of slavery are not necessarily indications of what the period was actually like. No one set viewpoint can adequately explain the complexity of the institution of slavery.

Speaker 2 (07:53):
Gone with the Wind provided a sympathetic viewpoint on the Confederacy, which to modernize, is intolerably racist, but to those in the early 20th century, was a nostalgic reflection on their past.

Chris (08:02):
Glory provided a story of empowerment that simultaneously reflected the colorblind mentality that overcame the '80s Americans, who in many ways, viewed themselves as beyond racial discrimination.

Speaker 2 (08:11):
Lastly, 12 Years a Slave likely depicted the most historically accurate version of history despite its dramatization, and demonstrated a modern inclination to allow other non-majority voices to be heard in popular media, which forced white audiences to reconcile with the non-revised history of America.